

Pembroke airport confident of landing a carrier

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The Pembroke and Area Airport Commission is confident of landing an air carrier providing regular passenger service to Toronto within the next year and a half.

This effort is now boosted by the results of a feasibility study which show there is more than enough regional interest to support daily flights to the provincial capital.

At a press conference held Tuesday morning at the Pembroke and Area Airport's main terminal, Allan Wren, Pembroke and Area Airport Commission chairman, said they have met with one carrier and have been in contact with two more, and while confidentiality prevents him from identifying the companies, he is optimistic a deal will be struck in the near future.

"It's on its way," he said, noting that depending on how negotiations go, they are realistically looking at 12 to 18 months before they would get a carrier in place.

Petawawa Mayor Bob Sweet, the warden of Renfrew County, said this is a great announcement that they are moving forward with scheduled air service. He said when you look at a 10 hour round trip from Toronto, then compare that with one hour travel time by air, that alone speaks of the need for a regular air link.

"This is absolutely essential," Warden Sweet said, noting that the railway is being ripped up, and it will be decades before the four-laning of Highway 17 is complete.

"Air is key and crucial" to the region's sustained economic development, he said, then thanked Mr. Wren and the entire airport commission for the "great job of moving forward with this essential service."

Pembroke Mayor Ed Jacyno said he cannot emphasize enough how important it is to have an airport in the area. He agreed the airport and its commission is an excellent example of how local municipalities can and have worked closely together to benefit the entire region.

"I will certainly be encouraging people to use it," Mayor Jacyno said, "and I look forward to the future announcement of a carrier."

The airport has been without a regular passenger service for the past decade, and the search for this anchor is seen as important to the facility's long term economic viability, as well as the region as a whole.

There were two previous scheduled service operators at the airport. Pem-Air operated for 33 years before folding its tents in 2000, and then Go Air Express had an eight month run from November 2002 to June 2003.

As part of its efforts to build a business case to attract an air carrier, the commission, using funding from the Eastern Ontario Development Program, arranged through the Renfrew County Community Future Development Corporation, launched a feasibility study on the matter. The CFDC is also funding meetings with airlines and interested parties to bring a carrier into the region.

The airport commission distributed a survey this fall polling area businesses and organizations to see if there was interest in using scheduled passenger service. The results were passed on to aviation consultants LeighFisher, who were overseeing the study.

Based on the results of this Air Service Demand Analysis, Mr. Wren said, "LeighFisher has recommended that the airport commission actively pursue the goal of scheduled passenger air service to Toronto."

Among the highlights of the analysis, it was noted there are 6,267 trips made annually which could have been serviced by a daily air link from the Pembroke and Area Airport. The survey results show there is sufficient demand to support air service on the Pembroke to Toronto route with two to three daily round trips, if connecting flights are available at Toronto-Pearson, or one to two daily round trips if point-to-point service.

The analysis found the most important factor in a traveler's decision to use a Pembroke air service is cost, followed by availability of nonstop service and total travel time, with the airport drawing on a catchment area covering communities west of the town of Renfrew and Pontiac County.

The consultants suggest the airport offer incentives to airlines such as offering marketing assistance, low or no airport fees for the first year of operation, and assisting with capital expenses such as signage, office space and the like.

As well, a public awareness campaign should be launched to show the cost savings of flying from the Pembroke and Area Airport as opposed to driving to Ottawa for a flight. Individuals should be encouraged to purchase a block of tickets, and key stakeholders should commit to using the new air service.

"It costs approximately \$110 each way to travel from Pembroke to Ottawa and \$127 to travel from Chalk River/Petawawa to Ottawa," the analysis summary states. This includes mileage, airport improvement fees at Ottawa International Airport and parking fees.

"The savings of over \$100 (by not needing to drive to Ottawa) helps to make the Pembroke and Area Airport competitive with flights from the Ottawa International Airport."

Mr. Wren said once they succeed in landing a regular passenger service, the airport will then be eligible for

grants to be used to improve the facility, such as resurfacing the current runway.

"We estimate that project to cost approximately \$5 million," he said. If they can have sustained scheduled service of 1,000 seats per year for three consecutive years, they could apply for funding through a federal government program called Airport Capital Assistance Program, or ACAP for short.

Mr. Wren said the future of the airport is looking bright.

"Because of this facility, we are open for business to the world," he said. "With scheduled service, that will continue to grow."

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